

Girl, 10, D.A.R.E.d to Scream

By Jerry Hicks – West Carrollton

It was the kind of real-life publicity money couldn't buy: A 10-year-old Newport Beach girl named Amber escaped a would-be abductor near her home last weekend. Then, with TV cameras rolling, she credited D.A.R.E. officer at her school for teaching her what to do.

You can bet hundreds of D.A.R.E. officers through the Southland were whooping when they saw that.

"You hope what you say in a class might someday save a child's life," said one D.A.R.E. officer, Tom Monarch. "But to actually hear her say it, that's just a great feeling."

If you have youngsters in school, you know that D.A.R.E. stands for rug Abuse Resistance Education and that it's taught by police officers on school campuses. In the classes for younger kids, the officers emphasize personal safety more than drug abuse.

D.A.R.E., begun by former Los Angeles Police Chief Darryl Gates in 1983, has its share of critics. That's partly because it's hard to measure its effectiveness. How do you quantify the Number of times a student turns down a drug offer—or a ride in a stranger's vehicle?

But D.A.R.E.'s popularity has mushroomed, Growing from 10 D.A.R.E. officers its first year, its 17-week courses are now taught to 35 million students nationwide.

"How well does it work? That's a crapshoot; we can never say for sure," said Lynne Bloomberg, who coordinates the D.A.R.E. program for the Newport Mesa Unified School District. "But I'm wholeheartedly convinced it's worth doing."

Just ask Amber. She'd just gotten off her bicycle to pick flowers in her Eastbluff neighborhood when someone pulled up in a truck, opened the door and tried to grab her.

Amber said she knew from her D.A.R.E. officer not to get close enough that he could reach her and that she should scream and run like crazy to get away.

Something else her D.A.R.E. officer taught her? Put personal safety first. But when possible, try to get a physical description. How's this for Amber's efforts:

The man was white, in his 30s, with short brown hair and a tattoo on his left shoulder. He was driving a green late-model Toyota pickup, and his license plate contained the letters PGE.

"She did great," Monarch said.

You can excuse his being so proud. Amber is one of Monarch's D.A.R.E. students.

What Monarch and other D.A.R.E. officers emphasize are the safety tips you might want to discuss with your children.

Here are some of the other tips:

- * You're separated from your parents at a store, so you head to the parking lot, thinking you'll find them. Wrong. Stay in one spot; your parents will likely come back there looking for you.

- * You're lost at the airport. Look for a uniformed person.

- * Beware of some phony messages or questions that abductors use: "Your parents have been in an accident. The hospital sent me to get you." Or "Have you seen a little brown puppy?" Or "You know which way to Katella Ave?" An unsuspecting child moves close enough just to say no—and gets grabbed.

Here's another tip: Come up with a code word with your children. If an emergency does arise, make sure someone you send to get your children knows what the code word is.

A final word from Monarch: "I'll tell the students, if a stranger approaches you, use your talents. You're loud and you're fast. So run and scream. They love to act that out."

For young Amber, it wasn't just acting.